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Class of 1981 Fifteen Year Report Alumni Comments

University of Michigan Law School

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RESPONSES FROM THE MEMBERS OF
THE CLASS OF 1981
TO THE LAST QUESTION ON 15-YEAR SURVEY ASKING FOR
"COMMENTS OF ANY SORT ABOUT LIFE
OR LAW SCHOOL OR WHATEVER"

Law school failed to prepare women for the rigors of practicing law and raising children. The "we can do it all" attitude of the 80's has resulted in women having little access to flexible working conditions. I know I have struggled to find a career where I can balance the demands of my family with the demands of the law. Few women that I know who practice in traditional law firms are satisfied with the balance struck between family and career. I know it was not until I left practicing law that I discovered that one could make a living and still maintain family relationships.

I cannot imagine a more interesting or satisfying occupation than practicing law in the setting I currently have. I feel lucky every day. I also feel lucky to have the luxury of not needing to be the sole source of support for my family. If I were, I doubt that the type of practice I would need to have would provide me with the same degree of satisfaction. I am grateful every day for the education I received at UMLS.

I've recently been given a wonderful gift--I've been laid off. I wasn't sure it would feel good, but my work had been unsatisfying and increasingly unpleasant for the last few months. Fortunately, I have a generous severance package and have saved enough so financial concerns will not be a factor until next year. But I still wasn't sure it would be much fun not having a job--I could spend a couple of days on the couch watching tv, sure, but after that, what? Last summer when a friend told me she had quit her job without having anything else lined up, I frankly didn't believe her when she exuberantly told me it was a "freeing" wonderful experience. but now I've been converted and it is a great in many ways. Since I was fifteen, I haven't had the summer off (and maybe beyond that), but have had to report to work, school, or some other structured environment where someone else told me what to do. I've described this time as a "perfect little treasure," maybe made more valuable because it won't last indefinitely (I'll have to work again), but for this time, it's terrific to be able to devote my time and energy to things I choose. I'm gaining a

sense of perspective, slowing down, enjoying the little moments of pleasure, reconnecting with friends, renewing hobbies and interests that I haven't had time for. Coincidentally, I've read a couple of good books: "Your Money or Your Life," by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin helps you question and analyze "how much money is really enough for me?" (most people think they need more than they probably do) and "Flow," by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi that studied the times when people said they were happy and time passed effortlessly (it occurs when you are in a goal oriented task and your skills are equal to the challenge presented.) When I return to work, it may not be as a lawyer since I have rarely found myself experiencing flow in my legal work. On the other hand, I will always be grateful to have a legal education and to have used it in my profession for 15 or more years. Adjusting to going without business cards, not having a title or affiliation to mention every time I meet someone or go to a conference, at first was tough. It's hard to give up the costume, the trappings, the persona that comes with the job we do--but this is the important part that is enabling me to meet myself again, to get to know what truly matters to me and the people I care about. I wish everyone could have the experience of taking a pause at 35, 40, 45 years old. We have a lot of living to do ahead of us and now I believe I am going to enjoy it much more than I would have thought a year ago.

I have this increasing desire to get back to what I would call the more "honorable" practice of law. I am constantly immersed in litigation where the methods and objectives seem not to advance any social harmony, policy, legal scholarship but simply to be target shooting. It seems there is less a premium on scholarship and ability and more on strategic sniping. Perhaps, this is just the real world. There is also such a poor image of lawyers among the business community--our advice is not necessarily taken--and we are asked to deliver messages/take positions we have counseled against. It's a flavor you don't get in law school.

My years in law school were the three most miserable years of my life. Professors were either not interested in teaching or were unskilled. We were lied to about how to study, e.g. not to use outside study materials. We were not instructed in how to study and excel in law school; we were left to figure it out for ourselves, and most people did a better job than I did. I deeply regret not participating

more fully in the various law school activities, but part of the reason I didn't was because I had no idea how important it could be as an educational experience or in getting a job. Very little instruction was given from a practical standpoint, so it was of little use in practice. Law school was primarily an exercise in developing powers of logical reasoning.

At the same time I was in law school, I was taking classes in the Philosophy Department. Life there was vastly more interesting and challenging. In law school, every time the discussion began to get interesting, we moved on to the next case!

I was dismayed at the lack of rigor in judicial opinions (still as an academic myself) but I didn't see law school doing much to correct that.

There was a surprising lack of thorough, sustained critical thinking about the law.

Also a deplorable failing to put the law in a practical context--especially on transactional subjects. Law school was mostly just reading cases, statutes, learning the rules. Law professors don't like to admit that, and maybe they don't know enough to even realize it, but that is what they do.

I loved law school and I genuinely enjoy practicing law. I am frustrated, though, by the enormous inefficiency and waste I see in the American legal system.

The law school needs to better prepare nonminority students from families without lawyers for the demands of law school.

Random thoughts:

1. If I had known how wonderful children are, I would have tried to have them earlier.
2. Law School was good general intellectual training, but not specifically useful to me.
3. I wish I had worked with more females or found a female mentor. Rather, I worked in areas (especially investment banking) which were highly discriminatory against women.
4. I never dreamed I would marry a practicing attorney!
5. I have an affinity toward my Law School classmates; and I cannot believe it has been 15 years!
6. I felt I was

"married" to my job for 10+ years to the exclusion of much of a personal life. Now I enjoy more freedom and a better attitude...how to get someone to pay me well for this!?!

I have left the profession, and am completing studies preparatory to becoming certified to be a high school teacher. It has been a large breath of fresh air. For the first time in a while, I am looking forward to my job.

As I approach the mid-point of my legal career, I have only recently begun to come to some conclusions about my career choice. When you're young, it's so easy to follow the path of least resistance and continue down the academic road. I was competent in the academic world and law school seemed like the logical choice.

I now realize that while law school has provided me with a well-paying, relatively secure position it has taken its toll on my personal life. Even in a relatively large firm, the client-driven pressures can prevent you from truly ever "getting away" from the office. My vacations tend to be "catch as catch can" affairs, which as often as not are scheduled to coincide with lulls in client activity, rather than based on my own family's needs. The continuing proliferation of new lawyers and consolidation of law firms has added a very real aura of insecurity to my daily life. Clients come and go, and woe to the lawyer that expects long term loyalty from any given client.

On the other hand (like any good U-M trained attorney, I can present both sides of any issue), the practice of law still gives me flexibility that is not found in the corporate setting. Since our law firm governance remains primarily horizontal, I remain my own master with the respect to my career. In the long run, I prefer this to the atmosphere of a pyramid organizational structure.

I think that my yearning for simpler times comes primarily from the realization that technology, which was presented as a way to provide us all with more leisure time, actually has erased the distinction between work and private time. I regret that loss. I read more often these days about big city lawyers tossing aside their current careers and going it alone to regain control over their lives or abandoning the practice of law altogether. I often ponder whether I could manage such a transition and to date have concluded its not in the cards.

I felt that law school (and particularly the Socratic method) was not at all helpful to me in my career. What I now know about the law, with the possible exception of contracts and UCC Article 2, I learned on the job. I would have been better prepared to get and enjoy my job had I had some practical problem-solving and drafting experience in the areas of bankruptcy, securities, UCC Article 9 and negotiations. I also felt and still feel, that professors did not treat students with respect. I would have preferred to be taught by the sort of gentlemen that I have encountered since leaving law school.

The profession is demanding and much more competitive than I expected. Being a partner in a major law firm has not been a bed of roses, nor as lucrative as I had imagined, but there is no question that my career is interesting and permits me to utilize my natural talents to fullest advantage. However, given the long road to partnership in a large firm nowadays, and the incredible hours worked by associates, I am tempted to steer students away from the career choice that I made.

--modern big firm practice and motherhood are incompatible and functionally, mutually exclusive.

--gender discrimination is an entrenched part of society, culture and commerce, it is unavoidable.

--one can fight back (and succeed!) but at a tremendous/enormous personal cost and, at some point, the purpose for the struggle becomes lost...

I didn't much enjoy law school. About 5 yrs. out of law school I came to terms with what it meant to me to be a lawyer and how I believe lawyers should function in society. Since then, despite the strong draw for lawyers who practice in my area away from practice, I have remained a practicing attorney and I plan on continuing--I enjoy it.

After leaving a law firm, I have been working for state government for almost 10 years. I now have a job instead of a profession, and a life instead of a career. I make enough (60 70k) for our family of 5 to be comfortable and live in a nice community with good schools, and I have time for my family--coaching kids' sports, attending school events and conferences, volunteering in school, PTA, and just goofing around. We have everything we need and time to enjoy it.

I know this type of "Cleaveresque" lifestyle isn't for

everybody--but I hope you all do have a lifestyle that suits you and are as happy with it as we are.

Law school doesn't really do much (or didn't do much) to prepare for real-life practice. Legal research was the primary "useful" skill learned. Substantive areas of law, in my experience, were taught in more of an "academic" fashion, rather than from a practical stand point.

Legal practice enables me to maintain a comfortable middle class existence in a vibrant urban setting. I am satisfied with the practice of law because I view it as a business (i.e. a means to an end) rather than a "noble profession".

By doing my work well and responsibly, I believe I am making a positive contribution to society. Further, my income allows my children to get the benefits of a 1st class private education and thereby gives them the opportunity to do what they want in life.

Keep up the good work. I am honored to call Michigan my law school.

Since law school I have added a master's in computer science. This changed my area of practice already and probably will change it more as I am 1/2-way through the U.S. Patent Bar.

However, I have noticed a qualitative difference in the reasoning processes of those who first obtained a technical and then a legal degree, from those who (like me) first obtained a legal and then a technical degree. If nothing else, the rarer, latter type comprehend both C.P. Snow/H.L.A.Hart and "Godel, Escher, Bach".

When I was in law school (1978 - 1981), I was aware that the environment was much less intellectual and much more status-conscious than the environment I experienced in college. I lacked, however, the maturity and perspective to realize how peculiar, and how destructive, the environment was for women students. I lived in the dorms (something I now wish I had realized was part of the problem), when male

students frequently referred to women students as "the third sex", where male students would make a point of discussing why they wouldn't have any social relations with women law students, where vicious rumors about the supposed sexual peculiarities of various women students commonly circulated. There was only one way I knew to survive emotionally in such a hostile environment, which was to attract no attention and make no waves. Women who did not follow that course were taunted both behind their backs and to their faces. The environment I lived in for 3 years was one which, if it existed in a workplace today, would constitute a hostile environment. Thank God I was able to stick it out (I nearly left law school at the end of my second year), and discover that I love practicing law. the emotional reaction I had to law school kept me from experiencing most of the "benefits" of collegiality--although the benefits of intellectual exchange with such a hostile group of people are certainly questionable. I have, in my years of practice, found that I enjoy the camaraderie with other practicing lawyers, and that I really, truly enjoy practicing law. I was extremely lucky to find mentors in my first few years of practice who helped me learn by apprenticeships what I had been unable to learn at law school because of the extremely high level of hostility. Would I go to Law School again, knowing what I know now? Yes--but absolutely not to U. of M. Graduating from Michigan opens certain doors--especially in my field (legal Services) where an "elite" law school background is a rarity. Those advantages don't come close to outweighing the disadvantages of trying to learn law in such a pervasively hostile environment.

This probably has changed--I certainly hope so. No one should have to overcome a hurdle like the environment I experienced in order to attend a public institution.

This survey seems to ignore my career choice--teaching at the law school level. It also does not capture how very unprepared I was for the type of practice I entered into. Going into a small firm where I was expected to hit the ground running made me realize the ways my legal education was deficient. I would have welcomed some career counseling--and more exposure to skills/clinical courses.

I would never want to be an "hourly" wage earner ever again. School is infinitely more intellectually challenging than practice.

Michigan does not do enough to promote its graduates for academic professors. Although 2 individual professors from Michigan have been useful to me in advancing my academic career, the school as a whole has not. A more active role (like that undertaken by Harvard, Yale or NYU) in promoting graduates for the academic market would be of great use to graduates who are interested in such jobs, especially starting out.

I enjoyed law school and now enjoy law teaching. Education at Michigan enriched my life enormously. Thanks!

The law school should place more emphasis on writing skills including formal training in writing. Seminars should be provided on career related issues: The Real world of legal practice, Business Alternatives to the Law Firm Career, etc.

I don't think I appreciated how difficult it would be to pursue a traditional law firm career and maintain a family. While they're both doable, the road to partnership is potted with inflexibility, skepticism and premium on quantity (hours) over quality. The difficulty in finding a mentor or anyone to provide guidance is also frustrating.

However, I've managed to build a decent practice, but only due to the strong support of other women attorneys who are in-house and want to see me succeed, all other things being equal. I thank them for their collegiality and support.

The first year of law school is great--don't ever change it!

I think law, like politics, should not be a life long career. My relationships with clients and work as a tribal attorney have been high points. The general dislike of the profession by the public and lack of professional courtesy by other attorneys have been low points.

I am proud to be a Michigan graduate. However, the experience, classmates, Professors, etc. do not evoke warm memories. I do enjoy the Law Quad Notes and may even come

to the class reunion.

Most of all, I miss steak on Friday. Thank you.

I spent the first part of my career trying to prove that I was the same as the men; the next part trying to prove that I was different in some ways, but could still do all that they did, though maybe a little differently; and most recently I am trying to find a balance that will make my life work for me and still provide significant value to the firm. This is a leap into the unknown as far as my career is concerned, and something I am willing to try only after many years of earning credibility according to more traditional standards.

Over 15 years I have seen the demands of the private practice of law increase steadily, both within my firm and in the larger legal community. At the same time, demands on personal time have increased dramatically for me, as a working mother with a growing family. The stress in trying to cope with these changes has also increased dramatically, making the practice of law a much less desirable profession for both women and men. We are losing too many good lawyers as a result.

The biggest problem I have faced as a woman in a law firm is the lack of role models who have dealt with the kinds of issues I face and legitimized different approaches within the firm structure. My options have been to follow the standard set by the men in the firm for my professional life or to create my own standards. The first option leaves me struggling with my family and personal life and creates significant stress. The second option creates great uncertainty, and therefore stress, as to what will happen with my professional life. Men are facing these issues now as well, and there is much more information in the press and elsewhere on how different people handle it, but these approaches still are based on individual circumstances and do not have general application or acceptance. It is still necessary for each person to face these issues and try to forge a new path alone. This is very stressful and difficult and results in the loss of good lawyers from firms and from the practice of law.

I was disappointed in most of my classmates. They generally were far too serious about their studies--skipping football games on Saturday so they could study, having little or no social life, and complaining about students who made noise in their social activities. I'll bet most of them have switched jobs one or more times or have even

switched careers. Bright people at the Law School seemed to have a poor perspective on what was and should be important. I don't blame the law school for that, except that perhaps it could focus more on accepting well-rounded students, rather than only the smartest students. Fortunately, Law School was an enjoyable experience for me because I became friends with a small group of students who understood that school was important, but that there is more to life than constant studying. These are people who could handle stress then and who can do so now. They're happy in their careers and with their families. They are not divorced. They generally have not changed jobs every 4-6 years. How many Law School graduates can make those claims?

I wish a wise, responsible adult had provided me with some counseling to follow my heart's desire. I have turned out to be too survival oriented.

I have fond memories of the intellectual challenges and the friendships that developed during law school.

If I were Dean of the Law School, the three things that I'd try to improve (relative to my experience at the law school) are: (1) Building a greater sense of "community" and "connectedness". I'd try to increase opportunities to "get involved" and encourage "getting involved". (2) Ethics. I'd encourage faculty members to incorporate some discussion of ethics into every class, in order to instill ethical sensitivity as a value in all soon-to-be lawyers. (3) Practical Judgments. Practicing law means helping clients make a number of practical judgments. Although I found my education intellectually challenging, in practice I discovered that I had a lot to learn about how clients approach their decision-making and how I could help in that process.

I continue to be pleased with my decision to attend the Law School at the University of Michigan. My law degree from Michigan is a source of pride.

Based on discussions with fellow attorneys from other schools, I am convinced that Michigan offered me a superior intellectual experience and a more socially and personally enjoyable experience than I would have had elsewhere.

Michigan was (and hopefully still is) a great place to go to law school.

Laws are the rules governing behavior in society. Rigid rules (e.g., strict enforcement of laws of all sorts) create predictability but can be inequitable in individual situations. Wholly equitable results require vast dispute resolution resources (much more than our society does or is willing to dedicate to the task) and create unpredictability, which paralyzes decision making. The legal system now over weights equity as a goal, especially in light of the resources dedicated to dispute resolution. The result is chaos, arbitrariness, paralysis and an understandable disrespect for rules (laws) that exist in theory but largely not in practice.

I continue to be frustrated by the apparent view of the law school that public defenders are in public service but that public prosecutors are not. Actually public defenders are publicly paid private advocates, while prosecutors have an everyday public responsibility. I do not mean to minimize the valuable public service done by public defenders. Indeed, I have found that they have more in common with prosecutors than either of us has with the private bar (at least to the extent it is an organized bar). But I can say quite confidently that I worry about constitutional rights a lot more as a prosecutor than I did as a defense attorney. There the rights were a strategy in defense; now they are a check against tyranny. Most prosecutors view public defenders as underpaid, overworked, underappreciated public servants, but we also view ourselves as serving the public good by discouraging crime, by vindicating the interests of victims and the public, and by attempting to achieve, if only on a case by case basis, some measure of actual justice.

1) Much of the writing I come across in practice is nearly incomprehensible on the first pass. I think law schools, including Michigan, would do practitioners a great service by emphasizing comprehensible--not just comprehensive--writing. Clinical courses in this area might help. (I believe there was a course in drafting legislation when I was in school. A broader focus would be better.) 2) Many of my classmates ended up in large firms straight out of school, as did I. I don't believe we were prepared for the all-consuming demands we met. I, for one, was overwhelmed for many years. I'm not sure there's much that law school can do to relieve the pain, except perhaps by

advising us of the reality. (Maybe it did--and we just didn't hear).

I see the numbers of attorneys coming out of law schools as a concern. People come out with huge debt--but the job market is terrible. Rates per hour put attorneys out of reach of middle-class people. The poor have at least some access to legal services. The practitioners in the 65,000 population city outside Chicago, in which I practice, have to handle so many cases to make a living that they don't do a good job in those cases.

Michigan lawyers should be encouraged to consider career options other than working for a large firm.

I am now aware that much of my dissatisfaction with law school stemmed from how little the courses related to my life prior to law school and my expectations for my legal career. The law school needs to recognize that the long tradition of representation of real people in cases important to their lives (e.g., family, employment, housing) is not dead and that talented people with fine minds might find the work fulfilling and stimulating. The school should recruit faculty with that experience and that inspiration--to serve individual people consistent with the finest traditions of our profession.

Law school was not a great experience, yet I believe that the substantive law I learned in law school was very important. The substantive law provides a framework in which to understand and research more complex legal problems. Most important, however, is the ability to write and write well. This was a very low priority when I was in school, but now it is a necessity. Very little is decided on the basis of oral presentation; virtually all decisions are made based upon written submissions.

Much of the practice of law has changed since I began in practice--mostly not for the better. Greed has replaced professionalism in too many instances and to too great an extent. Outrageous salaries for some have contributed to

the current over-supply of lawyers, as has the norm of the two income household. All of this has led to a general decline in perceptions of lawyers by others and of themselves, as well as a decline in the quality of life. There are substantial pressures today to be a marketer, in addition to being a skilled lawyer. Maintaining one's professionalism and sense of self in this environment is not easy. Personally, it's hard to predict what the future holds or what the profession may become. I remain optimistic, however.

The thing that most impresses me, in retrospect, about Michigan is that it was an environment of extraordinary excellence and collegiality. Other lawyers tell me of law school experiences of the "One-L" type all the time. I never had any experience remotely approaching this.

As to the future of the school, a greater emphasis on communication skills--verbal and written--and negotiation/dispute resolution skills would be very useful.

RE: Law School--I am struck more than ever by how poor a job the law school did at teaching us anything about the practice of law as a business. I am also struck by the degree to which U of M grads (law and otherwise) possess an unjustified over-estimation of the prestige and difficulty of their studies.

RE: Lawyers in Society--I am dismayed (but not surprised) at the participation of lawyers in the blood-letting going on in corporate America. If we truly are "attorneys and counselors", we owe our clients an obligation beyond showing them how to avoid law suits for age, race or sex discrimination during downsizing. We instead need to show our clients that it is suicidal to discard many of the individuals who know and serve their business need the best, merely from a short-sighted view of a narrowly defined "bottom line." General Motors recently learned a hard lesson about the bottom line effect of the failure of just-in-time inventories; I am fearful of the lesson our country will learn when our companies incur the costs of regaining the human assets which our colleagues helped those companies discard.

RE: Life--I can't speak for my fellow alumni. Personally, I am satisfied with (hell, I'm smug about) my ethics and my honesty in both my professional and my private lives. While law has a place in my life, it is not my life. That balance allows me to sleep well at night. I sincerely hope that my fellow alumni (at least, as many as possible)

have found the same balance and their own degree of satisfaction and serenity. (I must admit to doubts about this, though. You may recall the comments submitted by our alumni for the 1991 reunion booklet--not one in twenty reflected concern about, or goodwill toward our fellow alumni. I don't know how much the children of the UMC can mature between ages 35 and 40.)

Even though I do not practice law, I believe my law school experience was invaluable training in learning how to think. More than in any other profession, lawyers learn to be more than a specialized technician at law school. For that reason alone, we should be proud of the education and the profession.

The versatility of a law degree is highly overrated--particularly in this flooded market. The employment market for lawyers is further damaged by the lack of reciprocity between states in a world where spouses can be transferred at the drop of a hot. It denies the reality and assumes that 1) the attorney is the primary breadwinner and 2) will stay put in one community. Times have changed and state bars are not keeping up. We need a national bar admission process. My law degree and bar admission are a waste (virtually) but I still owe big \$ on student loans.

Life as a lawyer is less than satisfying, mainly due to the every-present stress, generated mostly by clients. However, I've met some wonderful people (especially at my firm) and my career leaves me with few financial worries. I've thought about doing something other than practicing, but I'm not qualified to do much else, so I'm living with the choice I made decades ago, when I had no idea what being a lawyer was really all about.

If I were a recent college graduate today, I might not choose to go to law school again. If I were to choose to go to law school again, however, I would definitely select the University of Michigan. No law school in the country offers such a compelling combination of intellectual rigor, cultural opportunity and unpretentiousness.

When my husband and I left Ann Arbor, we were convinced we would return there upon retirement. Now that we are over

40, we think Ann Arbor is too cold. Nonetheless, our years at the University and in Ann Arbor were wonderful.

I was blessed at Michigan Law School by having several outstanding and demanding teachers. I regret that I did not take enough time as a student to let them know how much I appreciated their efforts. That said, the great strength of the school when I attended was the extraordinary quality of my classmates. I was stunned by their backgrounds and accomplishments when I started school; I matured greatly by learning from them during school; and I continue to be impressed with them 15 years after graduation. That so many of them (not all) were and are such decent and humane people is an added, and unexpected, benefit of Michigan education.

My situation is unusual, particularly size of the firm and income. In 1993 -- income was \$330,000. I left to go into practice with my wife--that firm started in 1995, thus the drop in income but increase in job satisfaction.

Michigan is an excellent school. My only regret is I did not take advantage of the opportunity more at the time.

Why didn't anyone ever tell us that having a fulfilling career, raising children and having any personal life/hobbies was so hard!! I'm balancing/juggling better than most, but sometimes I wish we could just slow down a bit!

I have the fondest memories of U of M Law School. I believe it is a special place and it was a wonderful time in my life.

I feel fortunate that I have been able to achieve some level of balance in my life--despite the demands of my legal career.

It would not surprise me to learn that most lawyers are dissatisfied. Success in the law requires total commitment, and also requires characteristics that are contrary to those required for healthy relationships and balanced lives. Most lawyers seem to obtain one level of success at the expense of all others.

I wouldn't trade places with any other lawyer I know.

My greatest joy in the profession is being able to solve complex problems for people and make sense for them out of byzantine, out-of-date or stupid regulations. I am happiest when I know I am bringing unique, valuable skills to the task at hand.

My greatest aggravation is having to deal with workaholic attorneys and clients, who don't know when to shut it off, when to stop networking and turn off the computer. I often think doctors have a better sense of balance, are better able to say no. Perhaps this is because there is too much competition in life these days, and I long for a return to imperialist glory, I don't know. I love the hustle for awhile, but like with New York City, it's a great place to visit but I wouldn't want to live there. I know lots of people with no friends and no hobbies. No one should end up that way.

Without going into details, I'd have to say that I've had a non-traditional career. Nonetheless, having said that, I will be eternally grateful for the education I received at Michigan. It taught me how to think and really opened my eyes given the kid I was at the time. I recommend law school at MI to any that ask me. Thanks again.